Gender at the Virgin's Funeral: Men and Women as Witnesses to the Dormition

Stephen J. SHOEMAKER, Tallahassee

The story of the Virgin Mary's death, or her Dormition, is told in a variety of late ancient narratives that often disagree with one another concerning the events of Mary's final days[1]. Among the matters in dispute are such major theological issues as whether or not the Virgin Mary was assumed bodily into heaven, as well as many less momentous details, including when, where, and in the presence of whom the Virgin completed her earthly life. It is with the latter issue in particular that this paper will be concerned, tracing some important differences in those identified as present for the actual moment of the Virgin's death, or her Dormition. While the majority of narratives record the presence of all the apostles, who have been miraculously reunited from the ends of the earth, several important variants also exist. For instance, some early Coptic traditions involve only a few of the apostles in the events of Mary's final days[2], while another group of somewhat later narratives reports the apostle Thomas' late arrival, after Mary's Dormition[3]. A few of the earliest texts, however, indicate a tradition according to which men were excluded from witnessing the Virgin's Dormition, an early tradition that subsequent narratives have revised to include the apostles as the primary wittnesses of Mary's departure from this life. In some of these early narratives, the absence of men is quite clear, while in other traditions, the story is somewhat confused, seeming to convey two separate traditions at once: one in which only women are present and another in which the apostles also appear as witnesses. These latter texts seem to be caught in the midst of revision, as a tradition of exclusively female

[1] For a catalogue and overview of these narratives, see Michel van Esbroeck, 'Les textes littéraires sur l'assomption avant le Xe siècle,' in François Bovon, ed., *Les actes apocryphes des apôtres* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981), 265-85.

[2] Only Peter, James, and John are involved in Ps.-Cyril of Jerusalem's *Homily on the Dormition* (E. A. W. Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* [London: British Museum, 1915], 49-73 [Copt.] and 626-650 [Eng.]), one of the earliest Dormition narratives. Likewise, another very early homily from the Coptic tradition, Theodosius of Alexandria's *Homily on the Assumption* (Forbes Robinson, ed., *Coptic Apocryphal Gospels*, Texts and Studies IV [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896], 90-127), mentions only Peter and John by name, although the references to the involvement of 'apostles' toward the end of the homily might possibly include others in addition to these two.

[3] See van Esbroeck, 'Les textes,' 269-73.

involvement was displaced by, or merged with, a tradition involving the male apostles as well.

The most unambiguous exclusion of men from the moment of the Virgin's death occurs in the Coptic homilies on the Dormition that are falsely ascribed to Evodius of Rome, both of which were probably composed sometime before 565[4]. The first of these homilies has long been known, the so-called Bohairic homily edited at the close of the nineteenth century by Paul de Lagarde and translated by Forbes Robinson, who also published a number of Sahidic fragments of the same text[5]. Robinson's Sahidic fragments clearly preserve an earlier version of this text, which the Bohairic homily has modified significantly on a number of points, including specifically the inclusion of men at the Virgin's Dormition[6]. In the Sahidic fragments, as the moment of the Virgin's death approaches, Christ instructs his apostles, 'Arise and let us withdraw outside for a little while; for Death cannot enter unto her while I sit with her, since I am the light of the whole world.'[7] Then, Christ walks outside with his disciples, while the women remain inside, singing. When the women realize that Mary has died, they cry out, and Salome rushes outside to deliver the news to Christ and the apostles, who then return within to help care for Mary's body.

The same sequence of events is also found in a closely related but quite distinct homily on the Dormition that also passes under Evodius' name. This second homily, often known as the Sahidic homily, is preserved by two manuscripts in the Pierpont Morgan collection that have long stood unedited. In this text, Evodius, who claims to be an eyewitness to the events that he describes, reports that 'the Savior went outside, and we all followed him, since it is not possible for Death to come to a place where Life is.'[8] As Christ discusses the mysteries of heaven with his disciples outside, the women tend to the dying Virgin within. When Mary dies, Christ and the apostles hear the women's cries, and Salome and Joanna rush out together to inform the men of what has transpired. Again, as in the previous homily, Christ re-enters with the apostles to care for the Virgin's now lifeless body.

[4] For the dates, see Stephen J. Shoemaker, 'The Sahidic Coptic Homily on the Dormition of the Virgin Attributed to Evodius of Rome [Morgan MSS 596 & 598]: An Edition and Translation,' *AB*, 117. 3-4 (1999) 241-83, esp. 241-47.

[5] Paul de Lagarde, ed., *Aegyptiaca* (Göttingen: A. Hoyer, 1883; reprint, Osnabrück: Otto Zeller Verlag, 1972), 38-63; Eng. trans. and Sahidic fragments: Robinson, *Coptic Apocryphal Gospels*, 44-89.

[6] See Shoemaker, 'Sahidic Coptic Homily', 246-7.

[7] Ps.-Evodius of Rome, *Homily on the Dormition* [White Monastery version] XI (Robinson, ed., *Coptic Apocryphal Gospels*, 74-75, translation slightly modified). For discussion of the different versions [e.g., 'White Monastery,' 'St. Michael's Monastery,' and 'St. Macarius' Monastery'], see Shoemaker, 'Sahidic Coptic Homily', 242-4.

[8] Ps.-Evodius of Rome, *Homily on the Dormition* [St. Michael's Monastery version] 19 (Shoemaker, 'Sahidic Coptic Homily', 274-5).

Looking at the Bohairic version of the first homily, we can see that later Christians were uncomfortable with this tradition that not only stood at variance with other narratives of the Virgin's Dormition but also excluded the apostles and even Christ from witnessing this important event. The Bohairic homily includes a transformed version of this episode, in which Christ and his apostles remain present for the Virgin's death. At Death's approach, Mary is so frightened by its sight that her soul leaps into her son's arms, in harmony with the vast majority of Dormition traditions. But immediately afterward there follows a literary seam that signals an imperfect revision of the earlier tradition. The women weep and groan as in the other homilies, after which we are told, 'Salome went out, and fell at the feet of our Lord Jesus, and worshipped Him, saying, My Lord and my God, behold, she whom you love is dead.'[9] As the Bohairic homily reports these events, Salome's actions do not make very much sense: Christ is not outside, but has remained inside with his apostles in order to receive his mother's soul. Furthermore, he already knows of his mother's death, having just received her soul. Salome's actions would only make sense if Christ were in fact outside, as he was in the earlier homilies. Thus it appears that the Bohairic homily preserves an important trace of the tradition that it is trying to obscure, forgetting that Salome can no longer rush out to inform the men of Mary's death, if in fact Christ and his apostles were, as the Bohairic homily relates, inside with the women at the Virgin's bedside.

Evidence of a similar tradition also appears among the earliest narratives of another major group of Dormition narratives, the so-called 'Palm of the Tree of Life' texts, a group of narratives characterized by the presence of a palm from this mythical tree[10]. Unlike the homilies attributed to Evodius, each of these texts reports the presence of Christ and the apostles at Mary's death. Nevertheless, there are at the same time indications of an earlier tradition in which the apostles did not witness these events, but were put to sleep, leaving only Christ and three virgins as witnesses to Mary's death. This is most clearly evident in the earliest Greek narrative, published by Antoine Wenger in his study of the early Byzantine Dormition traditions[11]. While this narrative, along with the remaining Palm traditions, indicates an apostolic presence at the Virgin's death, by reading between the lines, one can detect the sort of literary seams present in the Bohairic homily discussed above, tensions indicating a rival tradition that has not yet been completely assimilated.

[9] Ps.-Evodius of Rome, *Homily on the Dormition* [St. Macarius' Monastery version] 12 (Lagarde, *Aegyptiaca*, 56; trans. Robinson, *Coptic Apocryphal Gospels*, 60).

[10] For a brief discussion and a stemma of this literary tradition, see van Esbroeck, 'Les textes,' 268-72.

[11] Antoine Wenger, *L'Assomption de la T. S. Vierge dans la tradition byzantine du VIe au Xe siècle*, Archives de l'Orient Chrétien 5 (Paris: Institut Français d'Études Byzantines, 1955), 210-41.

The first evidence of this comes just before Christ returns to claim his mother's soul, when the narrative reports that 'there was a great thunder and a sweet-smelling fragrance, so that everyone was driven off to sleep by the exceedingly sweet smell,' everyone, that is, 'except for only the three virgins.' These three women alone were kept awake, were are told, 'so that they could testify concerning the funeral of Mary the mother of our Lord and her glory.'[12] As the text stands in this passage, one would assume that the apostles, who were present, had been put to sleep with the others, leaving only Christ and the three virgins awake to witness Mary's departure from this life. But then only a few sentences later we suddenly learn that 'as soon as the Savior entered [Mary's room], he found the apostles gathered around Mary, and he embraced them.'[13] Thus we find that somehow, despite the fact that they have seemingly been put to sleep, the apostles were awake to greet Christ as he entered Mary's room.

Were this the only text to present this variant, one might well discount it, but this is not the case. It is also present in two of the earliest Palm narratives: the Ethiopic *Liber Requiei*, which perserves probably the oldest and most compete version of the Palm traditions[14], and one of the earliest Latin narratives, also published in Wenger's study of the Byzantine Dormition traditions[15]. Both of these texts indicate that following the thunder and the fragrance, everyone feel asleep except for the three virgins, who alone remained awake to witness to Mary's Dormition. Again, this would presumably include the apostles among those who sleep, but before long, we find that, as in the Greek narrative, they are in fact awake, ready to greet the Saviour. This tension did not go entirely unnoticed, and the next generation of narratives in this textual tradition resolved the matter by specifically adding the apostles to the three virgins as being among those who were kept awake to witness the Dormition[16].

[12] Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 230-31.

[13] Ibid.

[14] 'And a beautiful, sweet fragrance, as the fragrance of Paradise. And sleep took hold of all those who were standing in Mary's presence, except only the virgins: they [MS B reads instead 'he'] caused them not to sleep, so that they would be witnesses concerning Mary's funeral and her glorification.' *Liber Requiei* 66 (Victor Arras, ed., *De Transitu Mariae Aethiopice*, vol. 1, CSCO 342-43, Aeth 66-67 [Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1973], 39 [Eth.] and 26 [Lat.]). On the antiquity of this version, see especially the annotations in ibid., 75-105 (Lat.).

[15] tonitruum factum est et odor suauitatis, ita ut a multa suauitate somnum occuparet omnes qui stabant circa mariam, exceptis tribus uirginibus quas fecit vigilare ut testificarent de gloria qua suscepta est beata maria. Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 252-53. Concerning the antiquity of this narrative, see especially Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 66-92.

[16] Examples include John of Thessalonica, *Homily on the Dormition* 12 (Martin Jugie, ed., *Homélies mariales byzantine (II)*, PO 19.3 [Paris: Librairie de Paris/Firmin-Didot et Cie, 1926], 395-96; the early Irish narratives: Charles Donahue, ed., *The Testament of Mary: The Gaelic Version of the Dormitio Mariae together with an Irish Latin Version*, Fordham University Stud-

The second indication that there is something unusual about the early textual tradition here also comes from the earliest Greek narrative. After Mary's soul has left her body and Christ has given the apostles instructions concerning her burial, the narrative reports that the three virgins 'attended to Mary's body and placed it on a bier. After that, they woke up the apostles.'[17] Suddenly, the apostles, who have just received Christ's instructions for burying Mary's body, are said to be asleep. The three virgins, who were alone exempted from the trance that overcame the others, now must awaken the sleeping apostles to obtain their help in completing the Virgin's funeral. This is of course at odds with other parts of the text indicating the apostles' alertness for the Dormition, but on the other hand it offers significant corroboration of the initial statement that all those present except for the three virgins fell asleep. It suggests that this is not just a vague remark that should be read as tacitly including the apostles among those who remained awake. On the contrary, the explicit notice here that the three virgins had to rouse the apostles after the Dormition confirms the previous indication that only the three virgins remained awake, while all others, including the apostles apparently, were put to sleep.

Nevertheless, the problem remains that the text contradicts itself in this passage. Initially we are told that everyone except for the three virgins was overcome by sleep, and that only these three women remained awake to witness the Virgin's Dormition. Then, we find that the apostles are somehow awake, as they embrace Christ and receive his instructions. Finally, we learn that the apostles have indeed fallen asleep, when suddenly the virgins awaken them after Mary's death. Given this confusion, it seems most likely that the passage reflects an imperfect blending of two separate traditions: one in which the apostles are put to sleep along with the others, leaving only the three virgins to witness the separation of Mary's body and soul, and another tradition in which the apostles are awake to embrace and converse with Christ, as well as to witness the Virgin's death. The contradictions in these early Dormition narratives appear to be the same kinds of seams that are present in the Bohairic homily attributed to Evodius: in joining one tradition to another, the compiler has neglected to smooth over certain contradictions of fact, creating tensions that the later tradition would eventually eliminate or resolve.

Supposing then that we have identified traces of an early tradition or traditions that only women were present for the Virgin's Dormition, what are we to

ies, Language Series 1 (New York: Fordham University Press, 1942), 44-45; and Ps.-Melito, *Transitus Mariae* 6 (Monika Haibach-Reinisch, *Ein neuer* 'Transitus Mariae' *des Pseudo-Melito*, Bibliotheca Assumptionis B. Virginis Mariae 5 [Rome: Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis, 1962], 74).

[17] διύπνησεν τοὺς ἀποστόλους. Wenger suggests that we read instead διύπνησαν τοὺς ἄλλους (*L'Assomption*, 232-33, n. 3 and critical apparatus; 47-48). This would bring the text roughly into agreement with John of Thessalonica and the *Liber Requiei*.

make of this? Although this is a question deserving much thought and reflection, I will make only a couple of brief observations in the present context. Firstly, comparison with the life of Christ lends a certain plausibility to the existence of such a tradition. It is well known that Christian hagiography commonly patterns its stories after the life of Christ, and this tendency is frequently evident in the early Dormition traditions. At the moment of Christ's death, the apostles were largely absent: with the exeption of only the fourth gospel's Beloved Disciple, the main witnesses to Christ's execution were 'the many women,' including Mary Magdalene, among others. Therefore, an early tradition of an exclusively female presence at the moment of Mary's death would conform to the pattern established by the gospels, making the existence of such a tradition somewhat plausible.

If we can locate a credible precedent for this tradition in the passion narratives, we can also identify reasons why the Christian tradition eventually sought to efface it, and here again comparison with the gospels is helpful. The tradition of the empty tomb's discovery by Mary Magdalene and various other women is undeniably quite early, being acknowledged by all four gospels, while three of the four report that the risen Christ made his first appearance to the Magdalene. Nevertheless, even in the gospels one can already sense some discomfort with these traditions, as well as efforts to minimize their significance, such as Luke's focus on Peter and the appearance at Emmaus, and the footrace between Peter and the Beloved Disciple in John's gospel. Moreover, Mark and Luke note that the women's report was not believed by the apostles, a response also suggested by the rush to the tomb in the fourth gospel: the apostles only believe, we are told, after they have seen for themselves. According to the cultural prejudices of the time, the testimony of women was often not seen as entirely sufficient. This was a point that early Christianity's opponents occasionally seized upon, such as, for instance, when Celsus' Jew responds to Christian claims concerning the resurrection by dismissing them as the testimony of a 'hysterical' woman[18]. Thus it was perhaps seen as necessary to include a male presence at the moment of the Virgin's departure in order to assure a culturally prejudiced audience of the reliability of these traditions.

Nevertheless, it was not such gender bias alone that supressed the tradition of female witness to the Virgin's Dormition. Equally important was the (not unrelated) notion of apostolic witness, which scholars have identified as central to the formation of Christian orthodoxy and the opposition to various heresies. In response to heterodox claims of visions and direct revelations, often made to women, proto-orthodox Christianity responded by insisting on the primacy of the earthly, incarnate Jesus, and, consequently, the authority of the (male) apostles who had witnessed both his ministry and his resurrection. This

[18] Discussion of these different traditions, as well as the cultural prejudices: see Claudia Setzer, 'Excellent Women: Female Witness to the Resurrection,' *JBL* 116 (1997) 259-72.

apostolic witness provided the only reliable connection with God, and once the apostles were gone, their witness was preserved by their direct successors, the orthodox bishops. Only by clinging to the historical witness of the apostles, as preserved by the orthodox bishops, could one be certain of following the true path[19]. Such concerns no doubt contributed equally to the effacement of the early tradition of female-only witness: a male, apostolic presence was seen as necessary to secure the truth of the Virgin's Dormition for later generations.

[19] See, for instance, Elaine Pagels' discussion in 'Visions, Appearances, and Apostolic Authority: Gnostic and Orthodox Traditions,' Barbara Aland, ed., *Gnosis: Festschrit für Hans Jonas* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 415-30.